The politics of recognition, the politics of erasure, and the rise of anti-anti-racism in Latin America

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Overview of a paper in progress

The last two decades witnessed the demise of official color-blindness across most of Latin America. Almost every state in the region now officially recognizes ethnic and racial distinctions within their citizenries. This shift is clearly evident in national censuses in the region; whereas a few decades ago almost no Latin American states included questions about race or ethnicity on national censuses, the collection of such information on national censuses is now the dominant practice. The end of official color-blindness in the region is also increasingly evident in the adoption and diffusion of ethnoracially-targeted social policies in many countries, which take a variety of forms.

Most analysts of these trends – myself included – have focused on the politics of recognition that fueled and successfully institutionalized the visibility of afro-descendent and indigenous populations in Latin America in recent years. In this paper, I draw attention to a different reading of this trend. Specifically, I draw attention to the fact that the politics of recognition that has demanded and achieved the official visibility of race and ethnicity in Latin America is also, simultaneously, a politics of erasure. It is a politics that has relied upon the invisibilization of some lines of delineation as a necessary and often deliberate counterpart to the official recognition of others.

In the body of the paper, I analyze how the invisibilization of ethnoracial boundaries works in practice in the context of a broader politics of ethnoracial recognition. I identify distinct mechanisms through which official ethnoracial classification can effectively obscure or erase ethnoracial boundaries. Examples from several different countries are presented to illustrate the mechanisms through which erasure of some lines of ethnoracial distinction is accomplished in the context of official recognition of others. My analysis draws on conceptual resources from cognitive sociology and combines them with basic insights from political sociology to identify particular modes of erasure and their political consequences.

In the conclusion, I suggest that analyzing the politics of erasure as a constitutive part of the politics of recognition can illuminate how and why the latter breeds specific types of opposition. Recent battles concerning who counts as “black” for purposes of affirmative action programs in Brazil are a telling example of this dynamic, which will be explored in greater depth in the paper. As the Brazilian experience suggests, attention to how the politics of erasure are implicated in the politics of recognition in Latin America is critical if we want to understand and explain emergent forms of anti-anti-racist politics in the region.
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